

Administrator's Report

For all the events it contained, for me 1970-71 remains the year I traded roles with John Hightower. This piece of job-juggling, by which he resigned as executive director to become a member of the Council, while I resigned from the Council to replace him, has had the unintended consequence that each of us now knows an unconscionable amount about the other's powers and prerogatives. But it is highly satisfying to follow him as the Council's administrative head, and to help in the transition toward the stable, long-term State support for the arts which is in process of emerging.

During the eleven years of its existence, the Council has grown enormously, even before the appropriation of 1970 which enlarged its budget by nearly ten times. Throughout the trials of expansion and change, however, it has held fast to certain basic principles and practices. The principles had to do with the proper behavior of government in an area where freedom to the edge of anarchy is a necessary condition; the practices had to do with style. Over these same years the Council had accumulated not only a reservoir of experience but a determination to avoid becoming a Ministry of Culture, a bureaucratic arbiter of official taste. It sought to do this by democratizing its decision-making processes and by acting, as far as humanly possible, in sympathetic response to the needs and priorities of the arts community of the State. Its standard was excellence, but if it pressed for other changes than in quality it did so in the light of long-term goals: the transition from amateur to professional, from an elite to a broad-based public orientation.

Such at least was the overall spirit of the enterprise when last year the Governor and the Legislature dramatically increased our budget and, in so doing, transformed the Council's mission. Previously we had thought and acted very much in the manner of a foundation, as though our funds were seed money, avoiding long-term commitment. But the new universe we had entered was one in which the principle of government support over an extended period seemed to be on the edge of acceptance (as, indeed, it has since been accepted), and the difference between temporary aid and sustained support was fundamental and philosophical.

What were the priorities now? How would the program be administered? Would it be possible to retain suppleness and sensitivity in such altered circumstances? The first question to be answered, as we later discovered, significantly affected the others. This was the decision to retain the organization of the Council staff essentially as it had been, since there was neither time nor budget to set up an entirely new staff structure. To give detailed attention to over eight hundred applications, however, and have money on its way to all the recipients before the fiscal year was over, called for doubling up the existing schedule — twice as many meetings, twice as much work. The Council members outdid themselves in regular attendance throughout the summer months, and of the staff I can say only that I have rarely seen so overworked a group as I found on my arrival in September 1970. But their strenuous effort should not obscure the essential point, which was — when put to the test — that the Council's methods and methodology worked, even with enlarged resources and an enlarged area of responsibility. The earlier insistence on professionalism, on the recognition of artistic quality, the nurturing of institutions, and the general practice of finding solutions to existing problems (rather than finding problems for existing solutions) — even in the new world of major funding, all were proved again to be justified.

A great many factors made this success possible, not least among them the decade of experience which the Council had already accumulated; we did not start from scratch. For extra staff, we were able to turn to friends in the arts community who were familiar with its ways. That community itself, moreover, bore with extraordinary patience the burden of added paperwork and the frustrating delays which inevitably attend a new program. We began, also, with the rich resources of the one state in the nation where cultural activities are most densely concentrated. We could do a lot with a little (relatively speaking), because a lot was already here. We were now able to demonstrate convincingly what could hitherto only be asserted, that the arts are not ancillary to American life but a major economic activity, with very sizable capitalization, large operating budgets, and impressive payrolls. What we provided was the margin to make the State's cultural resources available and accessible — the State's contribution being only a fraction of the total operating budgets of the non-profit arts organizations which applied for aid. We also showed that

government support would not dry up the other traditional sources, for these in fact increased. A preliminary study of the figures suggests that every dollar the State spent on the arts generated more than twice as much from other sources, amply supporting the Buffalo Evening News in saying, "We don't know any place where the people of New York, for the modest price of \$1-a-head, got a better buy in terms of enhancing the quality of life"

After this year's ordeal by enlargement, it should certainly be hoped that the Council's attitudes and approaches will change. In fact some changes are already apparent — a greater emphasis on community and collaborative efforts, on regional and service associations, on marrying institution to institution. Where in the past we had tended to conceive of growth in terms of a single organization's vitality, we are beginning to see it also as a function of fruitful interdependence. But as far as 1970-71 is concerned, as a newcomer to the staff I was again and again impressed by our indebtedness to the past, by the fact that we could always fall back on what we knew—of arts organizations, of the communities within the State, of the uses and abuses of public funding. What the reader finds in this report, in other words, must not be regarded as though it had appeared full-blown overnight, but as the reaping of a harvest long in the growing. To shift the metaphor, we dug into our intellectual capital. What remains for us is to renew it, to develop ideas and instruments as appropriate to our second decade as those my predecessor and his colleagues did in our first.

Eric Larrabee

